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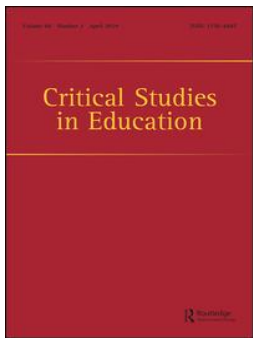
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Integrated networks of care: supporting teachers who care for latina mothering students

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how three teachers developed a similar mindset and practice of care for Latina mothering students within a caring alternative school located along the U.S./Mexico border. Three narratives are featured to reveal how teachers draw upon a network of support to transform themselves into family-like figures for their students. The concept '*Integrated networks of care*' is introduced as a framework that can explain communal support that can sustain the care labor of teachers at an institutional level. The article ends with a call for education leaders and policy makers to also integrate into care networks to support demanding care labor in schools.

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Introduction

I think [teen parents] feel at home. That's my goal: to make them feel at home. We've had teachers who make [teen parents] feel like [they have] done something wrong, and those teachers don't last long here. One teacher was openly critical, and he was gone very shortly, because we don't do that. If you don't think it's right, then you need to be somewhere else because this may not agree with your personal values, but this is reality. It's very much reality for those girls, and we've got to give them everything that we possibly can to help them make a success of their life. – Mrs. Richardson, Interview

Mrs. Richardson (pseudonym) looked straight at me with a stern expression when she made the above statement. Using her index finger, she pushed straight down onto the desk to punctuate her point. She made it clear that it was unacceptable for any teacher at the school to stigmatize Latina teen mothers, and it was against the school's culture to not validate the personal lives of students. If a teacher's personal values did not align with the school's priority of supporting *all* students, no matter their circumstances, then they could leave. This is how strongly Mrs. Richardson and the rest of the teachers and staff felt about providing a 'nurturing culture of caring' (school newsletter) at RGV school, an alternative school located along the U.S./Mexico border in deep, South Texas. During my time at RGV school, it became clear that everyone was on the same page with creating a sense of 'home' and 'family' for students. Teachers, especially, did not shy away from

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caring for Latina teen mothers – students who are typically situated as impossible student subjects and who are rendered ‘too difficult’ to teach, and thus not worth the educational investment (Pillow, 2004). This mindset of caring for all students was indicative of an institutional structure that valued care.

With this in mind, the following research questions guide this article: (1) *How can the needs of impossible students subjects, like Latina mothering students, be addressed by teachers?* (2) *What does it look like when all teachers are on the same page in caring for impossible student subjects?* (3) *What does it take to sustain the care work of teachers who work with these students?* These questions are important because they address gaps in the literature that conceptualize care as individual pedagogical practices (Noddings, 2013), or responses to structural injustice (Rolón-Dow, 2005). They also demystify the teachers as ‘heroes’ (Biklen, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2015) by making their care work *visible* (Luttrell, 2020) and humanizing their efforts. Additionally, these questions reveal the communal care labor required at an institutional level to *sustain* the care work of teachers. Thus, using narrative inquiry and feminist of color care theories, I present narratives of how three teachers drew upon the support of colleagues, and a caring school culture, to transform themselves into family-like support figures for students. I call these support systems *integrated networks of care*, or communal care that is mobilized across spaces, bodies, and divisions, to sustain multiple caring efforts and relationships with some of the most marginalized students (like Latina mothering students).

Integrated networks of care address the current educational landscape for teachers. First, in a traditionally feminized profession, there is the essentialized gendered assumption that the vast majority of women teachers will naturally care for students (Biklen, 1995; Luttrell, 1997). This creates a lopsided expectation for teachers to care regardless of whether they have the resources and time necessary for emotionally demanding work. Moreover, given that most U.S. teachers are white middle-class women (Aronson, 2017), they are increasingly under pressure to engage in culturally responsive teaching and social justice to keep their biases in check with students of color and advocate for educational change (Ladson-Billings, 2015). To further complicate matters, the current neoliberal, high stakes accountability system in schools values test scores over community and care (Connell, 2013). This means that teachers often become isolated within a testing regime that prioritizes impersonal teaching practices to ‘teach to the test’ (Au & Tempel, 2012). These layers compound to create an educational climate that overwhelms teachers.

Furthermore, U.S. schooling is shaped to suit the cultural customs and family arrangements of white middle-class youth (Ochoa, 2011). Teaching is premised on the assumption that there is a white middle-class mother meeting every need of her child(ren) (Griffith & Smith, 2005). While parents are charged with helping children with their homework and other school tasks, there are nonetheless clear boundaries of home/personal obligations fulfilled by the nuclear family, and school/public standards met by teachers (Fine & Zane, 1991). However, what happens when Latina teen mothers blur the lines of familial and school expectations? Given their caretaking responsibilities and the challenges they face as young mothers, they are students whose ‘excessive’ or ‘leaky’ personal lives blur the public/private divide that structures U.S. schools (Lesko, 1995; Vincent, 2015). For these students, their personal lives and cultural ways of knowing cannot be left at the school door to fit into a white Eurocentric mold (Collins, 1991). This

makes Latina mothering students impossible student subjects from a mainstream schooling standpoint.

Brown, pregnant bodies in the classroom and the reality of their caretaking responsibilities reveal how schools are actually nested within the intersections of familial, economic, cultural, and political power structures (Erdmans & Black, 2015). These young women call into question a deep systemic problem in education: within a socially stratified and unequal society, disenfranchised students simply ‘do not fit in’ a hyper-individualized, competitive, and punitive high-stakes schooling environment (Pillow, 2004). The students in this study were pushed out from their mainstream schools and into an alternative school.

Given these impossible student subjects within this impossible educational landscape, teachers nonetheless must rise up to the occasion. However, there are costs to doing this in isolation. What the narratives in this study demonstrate is that a communal form of care is necessary to not only meet the educational needs of mothering students, but also address a systemic problem for teachers in providing relevant and meaningful care to all students (Noddings, 2008). Through the framework of integrated networks of care, I assert that teachers cannot care holistically for students on their own without institutionalized support and a fundamental change in the logic of ‘good teaching’ (Connell, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2015). This means that administrators and staff must be held accountable to support ‘good teaching in the collective sense’ (Connell, 2009).

I conclude this article with a call for education leaders to also be part of a system of care that can sustain the work of caring teachers. This study is not only urgent for teen mothers, but any disenfranchised student who does not fit into schooling structures due to race, class, gender, and care-taking responsibilities.

Communal care for impossible subjects

In order to lay the groundwork for how educators can collectively care for impossible student subjects, this article draws from communal and justice-oriented theories of care from women of color. To begin, in *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 1991), Collins drew attention to the cultural institution of *othermothering*, where women share mothering responsibilities to assist biological mothers. She articulated that African American communities recognize that ‘vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible’ (Collins, 1991, p. 119) due to interlocking systems of oppression, as well as the hostile environment that Black women face as they mother their children. The centrality of women and communal forms of mothering in Black cultures stems from West African cultural values and resilient adaptations to race and gender oppression. The woman-centered networks of sisters, aunts, cousins, and grandmothers in organized child-care provide a caring orientation that makes up the foundation of Black women’s political activism. Similarly, Trejos-Castillo and Frederick (2011) discuss that Latina/o family members often feel a strong, mutual responsibility to care for and support one another. Hence, Latina/o families represent a significant source of social support and guidance, especially for youth. Additionally, social connections, collective needs, and cooperation are valuable resources held in high esteem within Latina/o communities.

Moreover, in education, Bartolomé (2008) drew upon ‘politicized mothering’ (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) to point out that apolitical love and care is not enough to meet the needs of historically marginalized students. Instead, teachers must advocate and struggle alongside their students to work against social injustices. For example, Rolón-Dow (2005) proposed *critical care praxis* as a framework for educators to prioritize race and issues of inequity in their approach to care for Latina students (Rolón-Dow, 2005). Such theories of care also prompt teachers to situate themselves within networks of support for youth beyond school walls. For example, Ochoa (2011) reimagined care in education through her concept of ‘transformational caring – activities that are undertaken within or beyond the home space for the good of individuals and communities in order to challenge or change traditional ideologies or practices’ (p. 105). In her study, Latina educators were involved with parental and community activism to address educational concerns for Latina/o children. From this view, teachers can work with parents, extended family members, and community mentors to care for students and incite social change.

However, schools are not set up for a communal approach. Instead, they are organized with a hidden reliance on ‘the perfect caregiver’ (Luttrell, 1997), be that a teacher or mother. Much like mothers are expected to provide emotional care giving and nurturing at home, teachers (who are mostly women) are also assumed to innately care for their students regardless of structural limitations in schools (Biklen, 1995; Luttrell, 2020). This gendered arrangement places the onus of care on individuals without considering the unequal conditions in which students are cared (or not cared) for and educated (Luttrell, 1997). Schools also undergo institutional splitting and divided labor (Luttrell, 1997, p. 116), whereby teachers work in the classroom as if in a vacuum (Rolón-Dow, 2005), while counselors and social workers worry about home and community issues (Valenzuela, 1999). School faculty and staff are divided up into their respective roles with little to no cross-connection of what it means to care for students in a collective sense.

Still, in a recent study, Luttrell (2020) found that racially diverse, working-class children see the inter-connections of care across home and school. They also understand that care is accomplished through communal labor from family members, educators, and community. From the children’s insights, Luttrell (2020) developed ‘choreographies of care – a concept meant to highlight the constellation of resources, people, rhythms, shaped by different occupational demands and shifting schedules, feelings, and intimacies of family living’ (p. 86). This choreography involves the behind-the-scenes work of various adults in schools and peers in the classroom, who all work together to collectively care for one another.

What this work demonstrates is that, regardless of divided labor in schools, historically marginalized students nonetheless understand that care is accomplished through a network of people in their lives. The Latina mothering students in this study are no exception to this awareness. During my time at the school, they pointed out how the teachers collectively cared for them. The teachers also felt that they were not alone in doing everything they can for their students. Thus, there was a shared commitment and practice of care that sustained the care work of teachers for the Latina mothering students. While the theories outlined above unravel communal aspects of care work in education, they are not enough to explain what I call integrated networks of care, which I explain in further detail after the narratives.

Highlighting goodness through narrative inquiry

This study took place in a co-ed, alternative school in deep, South Texas along the U.S./Mexico border. Over the course of a year, I observed the interactions between three teachers and their students, who were mostly mothering students of Mexican-origin. I also conducted in-depth interviews with three teachers and five mothering students between the ages of 15 and 19. This study also incorporated thick description of my time in the field through extensive note-taking, gathering of school documents, and participation in school events and meetings. I used *narrative inquiry* as a methodology to present the caring practices of the teachers and the school.

In my study, three components define the narratives. First, narrative inquiry is the study of how humans experience and know the world. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert, humans are storytelling creatures who lead storied lives. Human interactions, relationships, and lived experiences are encoded in stories, and collecting these stories into narratives can address research inquiry. This means that the individual stories are the ‘raw data’ that, when organized into a narrative, can reveal important patterns (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narratives are also a good fit to describe teacher-student relationships, and the context of teaching and schools (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Craig, 2011). While various forms of data, or stories, can be generated (e.g., documents, interviews, notes from the field), narratives are not the sum of all parts. Not every piece of data is directly stated; instead, narratives provide a sense of the whole. In this case, the whole is how the teachers practiced care to support their students within a caring school.

Second, in narrative inquiry, a researcher connects with participants through mutual respect, also known as connected knowing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This mutual relationship involves the research participants’ input and shaping of the research study, enabling the researcher to develop a more intuitive narrative and analysis of the data. During my time in the field, I witnessed intimate teacher-student moments and engaged in supportive conversations with teachers, students, and staff. I also worked in school events and provided emotional support for teachers who sometimes felt overwhelmed and stressed (as shown in one narrative). Several stories arose from these experiences, so I wrote memos, alongside field notes, to make sense of emerging narratives.

Lastly, the researcher’s voice (along with the participants’) is another key component of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I shared my notes and memos with the teachers to see whether they resonated with them. This prompted dialogue from the teachers about how they connected with students and how their colleagues at the school also worked hard to support mothering students. During student interviews, I also shared my insights from developing memos to welcome their interpretation of key moments I observed in the field. As experts of their own lives, they provided feedback and explained what they liked about their teachers and the school. These voices informed my memo writing process, which eventually manifested into the narratives presented in this article. As a Chicana/Tejana working-class woman who grew up and worked in the same area as a former Biology teacher, my voice also shaped the narratives. Having been a teacher, I also looked for important lessons from the field for teachers and education leaders. Additionally, as the daughter of a teen mother who did not have access and support to continue her education, I set out to humanize the mothering students in this

study and position them as worthy of educational investment. This is critical because teen mothers are often studied as a social problem, but I wanted to understand the practices that help them. That said, the iterative process of constructing the narratives through dialogue and feedback from the students and teachers enabled me to focus on what is good in the field (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and working well for the students. Education research often documents school failure, and while this is necessary, it is also important to understand what is working for educational change.

Narratives of communal care and goodness

The backgrounds of the three classroom teachers I observed differed across race, language, and citizenship status. Mrs. Santos, the teen parenting class instructor and program coordinator, was a U.S. born woman of Mexican-origin and from a working-class background. She often code-switched between English and Spanish like most of the students (and much of the general population) often do in this region. Ms. Luna was a science teacher originally from a nearby city on the other side (el otro lado) of the U.S./Mexico border. She spoke English with a northern Mexican accent. Finally, Mrs. Richardson, the English Language Arts teacher, was a white woman from a small town in central Texas who also spoke English, but sporadically used expressions in Spanish (i.e. ¡Chihuahuas!). Although, the teachers were of different backgrounds and taught in different content areas, they shared a commitment to care for students. In the following sections, I present narratives of what this shared commitment looked like and how it was sustained by *integrated networks of care* at the school. All participant names are pseudonyms.

Integrated communities of care

During one of my initial visits to RGV School, I walked into the main office surprised to find the room packed with people of all ages holding gifts, flowers, and balloons that read ‘Congratulations!’ or ‘¡Felicidades!’ It was the first time I found myself wiggling into a school office overflowing with family, friends, and warm energy. It felt like a small pachanga (party) with overlapping layers of pláticas (conversations), laughter, and small children playing with the balloons. The only thing that was missing was music, but that was about to change. I had just started my fieldwork, so I was not yet familiar with school routines. I asked Imelda, who worked at the front desk, whether there was an event going on. She replied, ‘No, this is what we do every time a student graduates.’ Suddenly, a young woman emerged from the back of the office wearing a blue cap and gown. A yellow tassel hung down from her cap as she smoothed out her gown. What stood out the most, however, was her beaming smile. She took her position at the front door of the office as she ran her fingers through her hair to make sure it was in place. Her subtle ‘dance-like’ movements and shuffling gave hints that she was a bit nervous, but the affirmation from her family and the staff in the office kept her composed and reassured. She was ready for the cue to begin her walk around the school. I’ll never forget the song that signaled the beginning of her ceremony, it was ‘Celebrate Good Times’ by Kool and the Gang. ‘Ah! There’s the music to complete the celebration,’ I thought to myself.

As the funk tune flowed out of the announcement speakers, everyone from inside the classrooms emerged to line up along the hallway. Teacher, students, and staff all swayed and moved to the music. After the assistant principal gave the young woman the ‘go ahead,’ she quickly straightened up and took her first steps out of the office. Imelda announced the student’s name and asked everyone to celebrate her accomplishment. Nancy, the graduate with long, dark, and meticulously straightened hair, demurely raised her brown hand to cover her laughter as she walked among family, friends, teachers, peers, and staff. She walked through the school hallways where bodies shifted from side to side and many clapped their hands to the rhythm of the music. A steady stream of cheers followed her as she circled her way through the building to end up back at the front entrance where her family waited. They swarmed her at the finish line with gifts, hugs and kisses. This was a special day in which family and the school as a whole came together to celebrate a young Mexicana’s accomplishment. Someone who looked like her is seldom associated with the image of a successful student in the U.S. context (Ochoa, 2011). However, that day I witnessed community and belonging for this young woman. I thought to myself, ‘imagine if all schools did this for their students?’

During my time at the school, I observed many more community events, indicating that there were no divisions between the school and the outside world. The mothering students were also welcome to bring their babies to campus. In the school website and newsletters, it was common to see pictures of the young mothers with their babies at school events like graduation and fashion shows. Teen mothers were also depicted visiting their children at the school daycare center. In these pictures, the proud mothers posed with their children alongside family members, teachers, and daycare staff. Several of the Latina mothers shared with me they felt supported at the school because of the small campus size and close-knit feel. They also appreciated access to home schooling, small classroom sizes, and individualized instruction. However, the fact that they could bring their babies to school and not be looked down on was the biggest sign of care. For these young women, integrated communal care that extended beyond school walls to welcome their family and community was essential.

Integrating the personal

Five minutes before the end of her 7th period class, Mrs. Richardson gave the usual announcement that it was time for students to put away laptops (provided by the school) and pack up their belongings. Out of nowhere, Mariana exclaimed loudly, ‘All the teachers that come [to RGV School] are nice!’ I looked up to see who she was talking to, only to find her focused on putting away her things and zipping up her backpack. She was talking to herself out loud as if confirming a thought that passed through her mind. I jotted down what she said and I chewed on it to make sense of why she said that as a matter-of-fact. Upon closer examination, she made this remark after a productive dialogue with Mrs. Richardson about her new project regarding a Chicana feminist scholar, Gloria Anzaldúa. Mariana was shocked and pleased to learn that Anzaldúa grew up only a few miles away from where the school was located! Mrs. Richardson always modified the self-paced modules in her class to make them personally relevant for students, and Mariana certainly noted this approach. However, her comment that *all* the teachers at RGV School are nice, or rather, they care, indicates another important point:

Mrs. Richardson was one piece of an integrated network of pedagogical care among the teachers in which they engaged the personal lives and interests of their students. Rather than making a blanket assumption about teachers as automatically caring (Luttrell, 2020), she was acknowledging the contours of the care labor that her teachers invested in her and how she was touched by it.

The teachers understood that their role encompassed more than teaching content. They also saw themselves as mentors and extended family members to students. This othermothering approach enabled the teachers to integrate the personal struggles of students into the classroom. Mrs. Santos made this point when she told me, ‘Imagine if we didn’t talk about [hardships] at all? How would [they] be feeling the rest of the day? [They] wouldn’t be able to concentrate on math or social studies, or whatever classes they’re in. These girls deserve to be listened to!’

One way teachers invited the personal into school life was by recognizing the unjust obstacles and stigma the young mothers faced. They often encouraged the Latina women to never give up. Teen mother Valerie shared:

[Mrs. Santos has] given me a lot of advice. Honestly, being in her class has actually made me more open-minded, and not let people put me down, and keep pushing myself. Before, I would let little things get to me. Then I would go to her class, listen to things she would say, or I would stay after class and talk to her. I can honestly say that her advice is really helpful.

Mrs. Santos took on a motherly role when building community in her class, expressing to students that she loved them and that they needed to take care of one another. During one of my visits, Darlene, the youngest mothering student in the class, asked Mrs. Santos whether she had children. Mrs. Santos looked up to say ‘yes’ as she pointed to all her students in the room, signaling that the young women were her daughters.

Mrs. Richardson also fostered supportive relationships with her students by providing advice: ‘I usually have a little conversation with the girls, and I tell them that I want to in *no* way pressure them further [in class]. I understand the pressures of being a mom, but it’s important to try your best at school because the more education you have, the more money you’re gonna make. You can take care of yourself and your baby.’ Mrs. Richardson was aware of the demanding circumstances the young mothers faced as they pursued their education. Regardless, she always put her students’ needs first:

I think it’s real important for a teacher to remember that he or she . . . yes this is a job and yes [teachers] deserve to be paid and have our days off, and blah, blah, blah. But that is a separate issue. If you’re a teacher, you understand, you have to keep that separate when you walk in this room. You have to put the kids first. You have to! Otherwise, go do something else. If you put the kids first, you’re gonna be interested in what they’re doing. You’re going to care about what happens to them.

Similarly, Ms. Luna explained, ‘Put yourself in your students’ shoes! Because there are sometimes circumstances that prevent them from doing certain stuff.’ For Ms. Luna ongoing communication and flexibility was key in her caring relationships. She often gave extensions for students who struggled with balancing care-taking responsibilities and school work. With a stern look, she often told students: ‘You don’t have to tell me exactly what happened, but you just tell me, “I have problem. [I] can’t do this.” Because if you don’t turn it in, I’m just going to think that you were lazy, right?’

While the teachers gave advice and provided accommodations, they also admitted that it was a difficult process to keep providing familial care. The teachers worried that personalized care, emotional investment, and pushing back against stigma was something they were not prepared for in teacher education. With exasperation, Ms. Luna shared:

I think my major area [for improvement is to learn] how to motivate students who have a lot of issues in their personal lives, [like abuse]. I really don't know what to say, you know? Maybe [that's] more in the counseling area? Because we can say yes it's gonna be better, but they might not feel it, because their experiences are different. So [the] major area [I want] to improve is to get them motivated. [I] want to know exactly what to do when the student speaks up and says: you know, uh, I was raped when I was 12 years old. What do you say to that? I really don't know how to react to that. So, [it's] those types of things [that] they don't teach you when you are in school to be a teacher. You have to be a mother. You have to be a friend; a teacher. You have to be a role model. You have to be a . . . you know [a] shoulder. You have to be a lot of stuff! And I'm not prepared!

Mrs. Santos also felt discouraged from negative comments she often heard about teen parents in meetings and presentations outside of the school. For example, she told me about a presentation she gave at a local education conference about the teen parenting program. After she finished, people in the audience expressed concern that providing services to teen parents only made the 'problem worse' because it allegedly 'glamorized' teen pregnancy and encouraged other students to have children out of wedlock. Yet, after admitting her frustration, Mrs. Santos turned to me with a hopeful gaze to say, 'But you know, if my girls can do it, I can do it too!' Although her profession was often critiqued and questioned by others, she looked up to her students to find strength. Mrs. Santos reasoned that if the young women could work hard despite the stigma, then she could too.

Although the teachers often felt insecure about their ability to support the young women, they were nonetheless resourceful in addressing their weaknesses. Rather than denying areas for improvement or giving up altogether, they utilized their own vulnerabilities to overcome obstacles. More specifically, they infused *self-disclosure* into their teaching to forge connections with students, address sensitive topics relevant to the young women's lives, and resist stigma about teen parents. Thus, integrating the personal not only involved student experiences, but also the intimate life histories of the teachers.

For example, after learning about her students' experiences with interpersonal violence, Mrs. Santos' decided to integrate the topic of teen dating violence into the teen parenting curriculum. She also decided to disclose her own story of being abused by her boyfriend when she was a teenager. Making the decision to tell her story was difficult because it took three years to finally work up the courage. Mrs. Richardson also practiced self-disclosure with students by sharing her experiences and struggles as a mother. Janet, a mothering student, connected especially well with Mrs. Richardson after learning about her former hardships as a young mother. The fact that Mrs. Richardson was open about admitting her own mistakes with child rearing was enough for Janet to feel like she had a mutual understanding with her teacher and could relate to her at a human level.

Self-disclosures, however, did not always revolve around complicated issues. During one of my visits to Ms. Luna's class, music became a central means for building community as students worked on their projects. It all started when one of the students

began playing various kinds of Mexican music on his iPhone. The music enticed several students to share stories about their families. Ms. Luna chimed in and began to disclose her Mexicaness by sharing which songs were her favorite and which ones she had danced to in bailes (dance parties). The students giggled when she projected gritos (an expression of joy similar to a yeehaw). Ms. Luna may have felt unprepared to handle sensitive topics with her students (as mentioned earlier), but disclosing her Mexican cultural tastes was one way she addressed her own concern to ‘motivate’ them. These self-disclosures may seem small, but they made a big difference in creating a welcoming classroom.

While the teachers were creative with integrating the personal, it was nonetheless challenging work to continuously provide such care. In the final narrative, I share a particular experience that I had with Mrs. Santos to demonstrate how a school-wide commitment to support teachers is integral to *sustain* their work in caring against the grain.

Commitment to supporting teachers

I arrived early to Mrs. Santos’ classroom one morning, so I waited outside her door. From a distance, I saw her approaching the classroom at a glacial pace carrying bags. After she finally arrived, and we walked into the room, she exclaimed in an exasperated voice, ‘[Researcher name], I am overwhelmed!’ Her eyes began to water as she confessed her insecurities. She was not sure if students were learning, or if she was being too hard on them, or whether she was doing enough. She sounded convinced that she could do better. It became clear that despite her seemingly endless energy and positivity with her students, she was still human, but like all humans, she has a breaking point. She was making visible the often invisibilized care labor that is more often than not gendered, not valued, yet expected by society (Luttrell, 2020).

In a therapeutic act of self-care, she dug through her emails in her computer to read a message she had recently sent out to the faculty. In the email she thanked faculty and staff for being supportive of the teen-parenting program. As Mrs. Santos read the email out loud, she looked up at me momentarily to emphasize the following line: ‘It takes a team to make the teen parenting program work!’ She further explained that she could not do her job without the help of several teachers, staff (including custodians), and the school principal, Mr. Sosa. When she mentioned the principal, I recalled Mr. Sosa’s constant visibility around the school. By then, I had memorized his routine of welcoming students in the morning when they arrived at school, visiting classrooms, and saying goodbye to students as they headed home for the day. He also enjoyed interacting with families and community members at school events and celebrations.

Mrs. Santos continued to read her email in which she thanked teachers like Mr. Fregoso for picking up baby car seats from the store for the teen mothers. She briefly stopped reading the email to explain the backstory. In order to make the most out of donated funds and save on delivery costs, Mrs. Santos was trying to figure out how many baby car seats could fit in her small car, and how many trips she would take to and from the store. Mr. Fregoso ran into her in the parking lot as she pondered, and upon learning about the issue, he offered to pick up the seats with his truck. He explained to Mrs. Santos that it was important to help because many of the mothering students often stated that they could not make it to school because they did not have a car seat for their baby to be

transported safely to the daycare or a relative. Mr. Fregoso stated, 'If helping with the car seats will help [the students] get to school, then I am here to help.' After sharing the story, Mrs. Santos turned to me with a look of amazement and said, 'Can you believe that!?'

I was genuinely impressed. My experience in schools as an educator revolved around the notion that every teacher is in charge of their own classroom. The extent of teamwork mostly included team planning and some sharing of classroom materials. At RGV School, however, the family-like culture fostered collaboration among teachers, staff, and administration. This became evident when Mrs. Santos thanked her own staff in the email, including her assistant, Michelle, and the women in the daycare. Mrs. Santos once again stopped reading the email to look over at Michelle's desk. At the time, Michelle was on maternity leave and I could tell that her absence was tough for Mrs. Santos because she seemed lonely without her companion. After she finished reading her email out loud, she suddenly switched to her authoritative tone to state, 'I am not glorifying the program!' With my latest reading about mindfulness in the back of my mind, I took a therapeutic stance and replied, 'It is what it is.' She put her guard back down and looked back at her computer to repeat, 'It is what it is, it is what it is . . . ' a couple of times. I also took on a supportive role for Mrs. Santos after she expressed her insecurities. I was swallowed up by the caring structure that Mrs. Santos clearly pointed out to me and I certainly did not mind at all.

At first, it was difficult to understand what compelled her to read that email out loud, but I realized that she was getting through the emotions of feeling overwhelmed with an impossible task of wearing many hats as a teacher and program coordinator. She was trying to get herself in the right mindset so that she could receive her students with the great enthusiasm that they had grown used to every morning when they walked into her class. Although Mrs. Santos was aware of the conglomerate of needs that rested on her shoulders, she was also mindful of the support she received from RGV School. Later on, I thought back on my own experience as a teacher. I remembered taking on too much and witnessing colleagues experience 'teacher burnout' from working in isolation. It was too much for teachers to take on the responsibility of their students on their own. An individual and collective strength emerged out of Mrs. Santos' moment of vulnerability. I understood that she was not doing the 'impossible' alone; instead she had a whole team.

Narratives demonstrate *integrated networks of care*

The three narratives demonstrate what I call *integrated networks of care*, or communal care that is mobilized across spaces, bodies, and divisions to not only provide care for seemingly impossible student subjects, but also *sustain* the care labor of teachers at an institutional level. This institutional approach to sustaining care work is critical given that teachers are often expected to be miracle workers in overcoming challenges and doing more with less (Connell, 2009). Each narrative depicts a different facet of integrated networks of care, including: (1) integrated communities of care, (2) integrating the personal, and (3) commitment to supporting teachers. These three areas are outlined below.

First, communities of care within and outside the school must be integrated. The current organization of mainstream schooling depends on the assumption that classroom space is discrete and separate from the rest of the school and schools are separate from

the community (Luttrell, 1997). RGV School, however, was integrated into the surrounding community to welcome family into campus, much like transformational caring (Ochoa, 2011). Trust was built into the workings of the school, including the movement of bodies during community events and celebrations. Additionally, rather than ignoring the caregiving responsibilities of teen mothers, the young women were encouraged to bring their children to school. The young mothers' family members, teachers, and even their children, were all integrated to fortify the young women's motivation to continue school.

Second, the educators integrated the personal into their teaching and classroom spaces with students. Institutional space is not just neutral space; it is raced and gendered to sustain social hierarchies (Puwar, 2004). The expectation, then, is for bodies to behave in discrete ways where personal hardship and other unwanted realities are checked at the door because of the western masculinist public/private divide that permeates organizational structures (Collins, 1991). However, the bodies of teen moms cannot be contained by these discrete spaces. They were kicked out of their prior schools because they were 'bodies out of place' (Puwar, 2004), so the teachers had to respond by also extending themselves as care-givers. For example, the teachers disclosed their personal lives, when necessary and appropriate, to allow students to relate to them at a human level.

The final narrative presents a school-wide commitment in supporting teachers. In order to teach against the grain (Reyes, Radina, & Aronson, 2018), it is not enough for individual teachers to act as heroes, because not only is this unrealistic for any person, it can also cause teacher burnout (Farber, 1991). Teachers taking on the brunt of care in isolation can also reinforce savior mentalities that critical scholars in education have critiqued (Aronson, 2017). Here, however, is a school culture that fosters a different educational environment for teachers and students to forge familial-like connections. Contrary to an isolating savior logic, the narratives show how different bodies (teachers, staff, and administrators) can work collectively, and across divisions, to foster integrated networks of care that benefit everyone involved. As Connell (2009) argues, 'Much of what happens in the daily life of a school involves the joint labour of the staff, and the staff's collective relationship to the collective presence of the students ... So whether an individual teacher appears to be performing well depends a great deal on what *other* people are doing' (p. 221–222). This joint effort also included the mothering students. This was evident when Mrs. Santos shared that she looked up to her students as a source of strength, saying that 'if [her] girls can do it, [she] can do it too!' Building off choreographies of care (Luttrell, 2020), integrated networks of care shows how students can reenergize their teachers to continue their care work.

Taken together, these networks of care created a coherent caring environment in which the teachers and their students felt supported. The narratives also reveal the labor it took for teachers to integrate their roles as mentors and community othermothers (Collins, 1991), and integrate the personal with the public, all within a supportive institution that makes this sustainable. In making care work visible (Luttrell, 2020), integrated networks of care ultimately show that teachers, staff, and administrators cannot separate students' private lives and challenges from their public educational needs.

Conclusion

Drawing upon communal theories of care from women of color, this study offers *integrated networks of care* as a framework that can mobilize multiple people (regardless of gender) to work across divisions and collectively care for students at an institutional level. What makes this framework unique from other theories of care is that it offers ideas for communal care at structural level. In order to care for historically marginalized students whose personal and academic needs overflow traditional classroom boundaries, and who face injustice and stigma in their everyday lives, it takes an integrated practice from multiple bodies, spaces, and communities (inside and outside of school).

Although, this study took place at a small, co-ed, alternative school, it is possible for larger alternative schools and mainstream public schools to integrate networks of care. Rather than prioritizing test scores and regimented curriculum, integrated networks of care offers communal care as the organizing principle for teachers and school leadership to work towards the common goal of maintaining the holistic well-being of students (Reyes, 2019). This framework also redistributes care work across individuals, so that teachers are not working alone. It can also remove divisions between schools and the surrounding community, so that administrators and teachers are connected to local social services and community resources. In this way, any school can tap into multiple networks of care and support from the grassroots level. That said, this can be a complex endeavor within larger schools, so further research is needed about how communal care can work in schools across contexts. Further research is also needed to understand obstacles to communal care, like interpersonal power dynamics, lack of caring leadership, and high stakes accountability.

One implication of this study is that it calls for education leaders to consider their role in caring for teachers and students at a systemic level. For example, while it is critical to center social justice in teacher preparation, teacher educators should also think about how to sustain this curriculum along the professional trajectories of alumni. It is not enough to prepare student teachers with knowledge about injustice and transformative pedagogies, teacher educators must also think about the longevity of these teachings in students' professional lives within an increasingly hostile educational climate. Education leaders and administrators are also essential in sustaining care work at their schools. The participants in the study discussed how the leadership of the school principal set the tone for a familial culture of support. Thus, the principal's commitment to care for his teachers, staff, and students was essential in mobilizing networks of care.

It is important to note, however, that integrated networks of care is not a top-down hierarchical approach. Instead, it is an interconnected system in which leadership works alongside teachers, staff, outside community members, and students to foster integrated care. This means that education leaders must learn about and be accountable to the local context, resources, and people within the school and surrounding community. Education policy makers should also be attentive to the resources that historically marginalized communities offer in fostering networks of support for youth and the educators who work with them. Afterall, communal theories of care stem from the traditions and knowledges of communities of color. It takes a different epistemic point of departure

to reimagine the current educational system. Rather than letting teachers sink or swim, education leaders can be integrated into networks of care that can help sustain the justice-oriented work of teachers.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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